

The Montana Meth Project Shock tactics Graphic ads have reversed a trend

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THE most famous American anti-drug advert of the 1980s starred an egg. It was first displayed in pristine condition: "This is your brain." The egg was then cracked open and fried in a pan. A sombre warning accompanied the sizzling: "This is your brain on drugs." Some egg producers objected, but no one else was too upset.

Compare that with an advert from the Montana Meth Project. A billboard shows a young girl with vacant eyes and waxy skin, pinned to the ground by a faceless man in a dirty shirt: "15 bucks for sex isn't normal. But on meth it is." On April 30th the state agreed to take that billboard down, after complaints. But other ads suggest that meth users can expect to contract HIV, beat their mothers and end up in prison.

The ads are apparently effective. In 2005 Montana had one of the highest rates of methamphetamine use in the country, and all the trouble that goes with it. Half of all children in the state's foster-care system, for example, were there because their parents had abused or neglected them while high. But Mike McGrath, the attorney-general, says the state was then "in denial".

An aggressive public-awareness campaign was the answer. The Montana Meth Project was privately funded at first, and the state took advantage of this arrangement to experiment with its message. Its radio, television and print ads are aimed at children aged 12-17 and vetted with focus groups. A close-up picture of rotting teeth was the most successful.

The prevention campaign was backed by better enforcement and treatment. Montana put the cold medicine used in meth production behind pharmacy counters in 2005, and is giving more money to treatment centres. The state now ranks 39th for meth use. According to a report from its attorney-general published last month, the number of teenagers trying the drug dropped by 45% between 2005 and 2007, and Montana's teenagers are now much wari-er of the drug than their peers nationwide.

Mr McGrath admits that some experimenters may have turned to other drugs, particularly cocaine. "Nevertheless," he says, "I'll take that trade, because the impacts are not as devastating." Arizona, Idaho, Illinois and Wyoming have all introduced meth projects, and hope to see the same results.